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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the reasons for including drama in elementary curricula; the relationship of drama to children's developmental needs; and appropriate strategies for teaching drama to young children. Reasons for teaching drama include drama's stimulation of high-level thinking and collaborative work. Drama and improvisation also require high levels of verbal and nonverbal skills; teach children to listen carefully and use nonverbal communication; encourage concentration; and help children learn to separate fantasy from reality. Three developmental levels of dramatic performance for children from age 5 through 12 are hypothesized. These levels involve: (1) personal and exploratory pretend play, in which children observe and remember; (2) expressive drama, in which children express themselves within the classroom society; and (3) communication, in which children develop performance skills, make artistic choices, and engage an audience. Practices that help children develop dramatic skills include choosing content matter significant to the children; guiding children in their acquisition of group skills; helping children try out characters and make playwriting or storytelling decisions; encouraging children to work in pairs; and engaging children in story dramatization. Five bibliographic items are cited. (BC)

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Making and Appreciating Drama: Pretend Play Developed for the Primary Grade Child

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At Arizona State University we are just completing a longitudinal study of drama with and theatre for children K-6. We are defining our terms from the Greek: drama, to do, a classroom improvisational activity; theatre, to see, the attendance by children at the finest appropriate productions available. The questions for our study parallel those posed by the creators of this conference: what is the essential role of drama and theatre in learning and the interrelatedness of drama in the learning process; what are the developmental trends and needs of the children as creators of drama and as audience for drama or theatre; what is the appropriate curriculum?

An outgrowth of our study was the development and piloting of a K-6 theatre curriculum for the National Arts Education Research Center at the University of Illinois. This curriculum is a second generation of a K-12 curriculum developed by a committee of the American Theatre Association and it reflects the call, made by the National Endowment for the Arts, for the inclusion of more information about the art form, its literature, history and aesthetics.

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In a final evaluation of the ASU curriculum, Saldana suggested that we "have long addressed <u>why</u> drama belongs in the school. . .it may be time to design a systematic approach for demonstrating <u>how</u> drama belongs in the school." I think that knowing both <u>why</u> and <u>how</u> and <u>what</u> is important so I will spend a short time discussing: 1) why theatre in education, 2) my

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hypotheses as to how drama relates to developmental trends and needs, and 3) my conclusions about what is an appropriate curriculum and strategies for teaching drama and theatre to young children. My observations are based on our longitudinal study and the work on the NAERC curriculum.

Why include drama in the curriculum? Theatre creates a metaphor for life, character interactions leading to change. Theatre, as all art, has both form and content; and, as with the other performing arts, it has production qualities. In theatre, unlike the other performing arts, the content is particularly assessable. Most people first discuss the "story" of the drama, or the theme--what the play was about. Thus drama in the curriculum can be used as a medium to convey the content of literature or social studies from the general curriculum, or it can have content related to special social concerns of the children. Vicariously "walking in the shoes of another" through watching a theatre piece or through assuming a role in an improvisation is a very powerful way to confront the joys and tribulations of our humanness. Theatre is a very direct way to experience, then discuss and, we hope, understand human motivations and emotions. This is ample reason to include drama in the curriculum. But there must also be attention given to the art form itself. Theatre content is formed by a playwright, or a dramatic improvisation is formed by the children who create the roles and the action. This process of making and evaluating choices about characters, environment and the action demands high level thinking and is an important reason to include theatre in

the curriculum. The children can act as playwright with a written assignment; or a group of children can work together to create a scenario for an improvisation; or the children, acting as critics, can analyze a play script, a production, or an improvisation.

When children work collaboratively to select characters, action and environment for an improvisation, sophisticated social skills are required. Not only is theatre about people, theatrical production is always a highly social act. Children must learn to listen and respond to one another, elicit and respect the ideas of their peers, be willing to abandon or change their own ideas to reach consensus so that the project can be done. Pretend play, the root source of theatre is a social act. If it is private play, the child is trying on the role or activity of someone observed in his or her world. If it is pair or group play, roles are conducted on two levels--the role of the situation (mother and child, train engineer and riders, etc.) and the role of the child in the group (leader or follower, male or female, etc.) Experimentation with social roles will continue in classroom drama, for children act as leaders, idea givers, and followers. In addition, the act of watching peers perform an improvisation or attending the theatre requires the development of the social art of being an audience. The kind of social interaction required to create a dramatic improvisation or attend the theatre is a third important reason to include drama in the classroom.

Performance in an improvisation requires high level verbal and nonverbal skills. Children must be able to phrase language

to fit their assumed character and to move the "story" of the drama forward. For example:

> Goldilocks: Oh, the porridge smells so good. I'm hungry; they won't mind if I have a bite.
>
> or
>
> Fox: Little duck, come closer so I can see your pretty hat. Good! I've got you; now I'm going to eat you.

The dialogue "creates" the character and tells the story.

In addition, the children must be able to listen to fellow players and adapt their characters' responses to fit the ever shifting nature of the improvisation. Young children in pretend play often drop out of role to tell the other character what to say next. In more mature improvisations the rules demand that the players stay in role and phrase their next speech so as to direct the playing from within the drama. An example from pretend play:

> Mother: What do you want for breakfast? Child playing Mother but now out of role: Tell me you want bacon and eggs.

A more mature sample from an improvisation:

> Mother: What do you want for breakfast?
>
> Child: I want some of that cereal with marshmallows.
>
> Mother: You know can't have that! It's bad for you. You're going to have bacon and eggs.
>
> Child: I don't like eggs.
>
> Mother: I'll scramble them so that you will like them better.

Helping students learn to think and express themselves within the limits of the dramatic scenario requires very sophisticated decoding and encoding language skills.

Nonverbal communication includes the development of large and small muscle flexibility and control. Large movement can be a part of the drama; the scene may require hopping frogs or skipping squirrels. Small controlled movement for pantomime or use of props is embedded in any scene; Goldilocks needs to pick up the pretend spoon full of porridge and take a big bite. There is also the less obvious skill of learning to signal when the players step into role or out of role. Players and observers need to know when the pretend begins and when it is broken.

Another aspect of dropping into and out of role is concentration. As students mature beyond pretend play in which they can drop into and out of role at will, they are given exercises and taught to concentrate on the moment so that the drama can proceed without interruption. This skill of concentration can be used in other areas of endeavor and is very valuable.

Finally, there is the very sophisticated cognitive process needed to separate the fantasy of the drama from reality and to understand drama as a symbol for life. To perceive, understand and appreciate their own drama or the work of the actor in a play, the audience/player must see the drama as a deliberately created representation and must also see the links to reality. Then the quality and value of the created piece can be judged. This level of thinking develops as the children mature, but also instruction is needed or the symbol systems of the art form are never grasped.

The reasons to include drama and theatre in the curriculum

are many. More difficult to answer, because our research is not as thorough as we would like, is how drama relates to the developmental trends and needs of children and then what should be taught and how it should be taught. The following observations are based upon my hypotheses drawn from the ASU longitudinal study. Further analysis of our data and further studies are needed to confirm and supply details to what I present. Special needs and interests of the students, teachers and community are, of course, individual and special and must affect any generalizations I make.

How does drama relate to the developmental trends and needs of the children? A basic assumption is that the pretend play of childhood is the basis for all further role playing, be it social or artistic. Social role playing is that which we do daily. I, for instance, intuitively assume the various roles of wife, mother, teacher, administrator, dog lover. Artistic role playing is based on conscious choices about the attitude and actions of a character that are then communicated to other actors in role and finally to an audience.

Given the assumption that pretend play is the first practice for adult social or artistic role playing, those who would help children learn to make conscious, artistic decisions about the enactment of characters should know what pretend play skills children naturally acquire and what drama/theatre skills they can be taught at their different levels of maturity. The skills in question include perceptive, cognitive, emotional, social, verbal and nonverbal skills.

I would like to hypothesize three levels of dramatic performance for children from five through twelve. First, their pretend play is personal and exploratory. Children come to school with magnificent skill as pretend players. This skill is based on their highly developed ability to observe people and remember their language, activities and mannerisms. I'm certain we've all observed children's detailed playing of parents, brothers or sisters, teachers. If you are a parent and have observed your children's pretend play, I'm certain you'll agree with me that they can be devilishly accurate with both verbal and nonverbal portrayals. Their portrayals reflect a growing understanding of the social role of the person they impersonate and, as mentioned earlier, the pretend play is a mechanism for the children to develop their social skills. I choose to call this play personal and exploratory because the children informally decide who plays and the roles they choose remain fluid and are used by the children to explore their social culture. Learning is intuitive. There is no sense of commitment to the development of the dramatic piece itself, or of working together to create a dramatic piece. There is no sense of communication to an audience.

The second level of drama work is expressive. At this level the children express themselves through the drama with classmates within the society of the classroom. Children with the guidance of a leader learn about the elements and form of drama and begin to develop group skills so that they can consciously make decisions about the characters, action and environment of the

scene to be played. They play as a whole group or begin to volunteer to play roles in small groups. Language and movement skills naturally develop. Broad emotional states may be depicted, but not until the children are nine or ten do they easily discuss character motivations and emotions. The children can also begin to find meaning in their work and to assess what they have done. Peers may observe their work, but performance for an audience is not requested, nor desired. Children take joy in the expressive play.

The third stage is communication. At this point the work evolves to a rudimentary art form and those children who have a particular interest will crave the opportunity to develop performance skills, to make artistic choices, and to engage an audience. Work from scripts can begin and as the budding artists mature, they can begin to create complete characterizations. Some children may never reach the point of enjoying or succeeding at communicating through the art of theatre. Those who do, probably will enter this stage by the fifth or sixth grade. And, of course, those who have the love of the amateur or the commitment of a professional will spend the rest of their lives perfecting their skills as artists.

All children seem to use pretend play to explore their world. Most children in the primary grades, with some teacher guidance will use drama to express themselves. All children enjoy attending performances and all children can learn to perceive and understand more about theatre and thus increase their enjoyment of theatrical events.

Drama is a natural way for children to learn. Leading children from their natural pretend play to the social art of drama and finally to theatre introduces them to a mature way to appreciate and understand their world. With the proliferation of the media (97% of the families in the United States have TV sets), our lives are filled with moments of dramatic enactments. We can't not include drama and theatre in what we teach and in how we teach. But tailoring how and what we teach to our children's needs and abilities is essential.

The field of creative drama has intuitively dealt with children's native skills by developing any number of methods for doing dramatic improvisation with them. Improvisation is very closely related to their natural pretend play. Roles are chosen, some decisions about environment and the start of the situation to be played are made, but then the scene unfolds extemporaneously. Not until children feel the need to communicate through theatre to an audience is scripted material needed--or logical.

Another advantage to working with improvisation is that more can be learned more quickly about drama and theatre in this fashion than with scripted material. In improvisation decisions need to be made about characters, action, environment--playwright decisions. In addition, decisions about the playing space are made--designer decisions. Performance skills become a concern as the children mature. It is also possible to be concerned about how the performance can be improved for an audience--director decisions. And as soon as the children share their small group

work with their classmates, audience etiquette and the rules of criticism are taught.

According to my scheme, in the primary school years, children will move from pretend play to expressive play--with the guidance of a teacher. But, pretend play will continue in the kindergarten and first grade in the classroom, and at home and on the playground perhaps into their junior high years. We should allow and encourage it. On the other hand, we should begin to work in the classroom on developing drama knowledge and the willingness to create in the medium.

What should be the content of the drama must, of course, be determined by the interests and needs of the children and their leader. Issues of importance to the children and to their school and home community are always strong drama materials. For our purposes here, let me suggest that nursery rhymes, literature, tale and myth are also rich and important sources of material. It is our responsibility to introduce children to their culture and to the cultures of the world. Drama is an excellent method of doing so.

Any beginning work will demand guidance in group skills. The first work may simply by setting and learning to abide by a set of simple rules. Children need to listen to and follow leader directions as well as listen to peers' comments and share playing space. But soon the children should learn that they have a responsibility to the success of the group and to everyone within the group. One of the excellent second grade teachers in

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our study school explains to his children that the classroom is for learning. Learning is an active process. In their room they can do anything that will help them and their classmates learn. They cannot do anything that will hinder their or their classmates learning. He then helps the children make individual and group decisions about what to play and how to work together to present their improvisations to the group. Given this base, the children are freed to create, and the work is stunning.

For very beginning work, I suggest using all the skills the children bring, the ability to pretend, to speak and move in role. This can be accomplished, even with a whole class, if the leader is willing to step into role. For example: Little Miss Muffet may be recited and repeated by the children. They can then be asked if they would like to pretend to be Miss Muffet or the Spider. (This signals entry into the pretend mode--an important step, particularly if the leader is in role.) Next the leader,as the Spider, speaking to any individual within the seated class might begin:

Spider: Miss Muffet, what are you eating? (If the child does not respond, but still in role) I see that you're not going to share! How about this Miss Muffet? I'm hungry.

Child: You can't have may curds and whey.

Muffet (leader): I know I'm a bit frightening, but I'm not going to hurt you.

Child: I don't care. You can't eat my food!

Muffet (leader to another child): You look like a nice person. Can I sit beside you?

The play can continue for several minutes until several children have had a chance to give their response.

Next, to set up a rhythm of active and quiet activities, helping the children maintain attention, the children can be asked to try out one of the characters in movement. Each in his or her own space can "become" the spider and can crawl up on to a stool and eat the cottage cheese out of the bowl. Then they can return to their seats and a dialogue situation can ensue in which they are the Spider and the leader becomes Miss Muffet. The leader can engage most of the children in dialogue in this fashion. With the leader in role, language can be extended for the leader can devise dialogue that can lead the child to ever more creative responses. This kind of in-role dialogue or movement "pretending" can continue until the all the children can easily respond to the imagined situation.

Children can be introduced to the elements of drama early and helped to make playwriting decisions. For instance, the children can be told a fable or simple story; then, with the teacher's help, they can decide the "three Ps"--people, problem and place. The people are the wolf, the lambs and their mother. The problem is that the wolf wants to eat the lambs. The place is the lambs' home where their mother has locked the door, telling them not to let anyone in while she goes for food. The children can decide where in the class room to place the house and the door to the house. They can decide, with guidance, what kind of chore the lambs are doing while they wait for the return of their mother. They can decide the sequence of events: 1) the mother sets them to work, warns them about the wolf and leaves; 2) the wolf knocks on the door asking to get in, supplying some

logical reason and the lambs respond; 3) the mother returns and the wolf--leaves, or has eaten the lambs, or? Again, the leader might play the mother lamb and the wolf the first time the scenes are played, but for a second and third replaying, the children can play all the roles. Replaying stories helps the more reticent children become involved. It is safer to play the second or third time since they have observed and probably memorized some of the action and dialogue from the earlier playing. There is less risk involved.

Pair work can be introduced, perhaps by the time the children are seven. Here, a scenario--people, problem, place--is decided; the children are divided into pairs and asked to decide which character they will play, e.g. wolf or lamb; and all pairs playing at once enact the dialogue and movement of the scene. It is important that with pair and small group work that the children know from the beginning that everyone will play with any child in the group.

After beginning experiences, the children may engage in regular story dramatization in which the story is told, the scenes set, the roles cast, and scene by scene the story is enacted for watching classmates. This improvisation is then discussed by the children to determine if the story was told, what characters were included; why the characters acted as they did; how the characters felt; how the characters actions are like real life. (A critique of the quality of the performance is not yet appropriate; what may be included is a discussion of which characters remained "in the scene," maintained concentration.) A

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bit more challenging for leader and children is a scene created with the characters of the story in an incident not included in the story. Stories chosen to play should have interesting characters, and action that the children can portray. Also, it is important to choose stories from a variety of cultures. For instance, the African Anansi stories and the Chinese, Japanese and Island fairy tales are available and delightful. Good literature is always an excellent source for drama. Most of the Caldecott books provide wonderful ideas for characters and action.

Once the leader has experience, it is possible to guide the children as they create their own dramas based on classroom, personal or social issues. This kind of work requires the leader to have a firm grasp of dramatic form and a strong sense of what is playable action. Given this kind of skill, improvisation created by the children with leader support may be some of the most exciting work. But introduction to global culture through drama is very important, too.

As the children mature, certainly by the time they are seven, some of the typical pre-drama activities can be included. These activities and games are created to improve performance skills: to help children image character, setting and action; to help them learn to develop movement and pantomime skills; to try on characters; to practice dialogue. There are a number of good texts that describe activities. It is advisable to wait with these activities until children are ready to share their work with their classmates--at least in the second grade.

This progression, growing from the natural pretend play of the pre-school child and slowly introducing the decisions of the playwright and performance skills, will help more children be comfortable with dramatic improvisation. Some few children arrive in kindergarten ready to perform; most are not. To help all acquire the knowledge, skill and love of the art form it is important to keep motivation high and let abilities easily evolve.

Attached is a copy of the K-3 NAERC curriculum guide and a sample of how that guide can be used to develop a course outline. With carefully sequenced drama lessons a leader can help young children learn to appreciate their creative abilities and to acquire a broad understanding of the art of the playwright, the actor and the designer. They can begin to learn about observing and thinking about drama/theatre performance--the artistic decisions and the meaning of the drama.

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